

New Central Air Conditioners Are More Energy Efficient

By Linda Cawley, IDWR Information Specialist

Although you're still using your heating system, it's not too early to start thinking about the hot summer months when you want your house cooler. If you've been considering buying a new air conditioner, this may be a good time to start shopping.

Air conditioning systems on the market today are 30 percent more efficient than those sold 10 years ago, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. Central air conditioners are rated according to their Seasonal Energy Efficiency Ratio or SEER. SEER indicates the relative amount of energy needed to provide a specific cooling output.

Many older systems have SEER ratings of 6 or less. The models sold even 10 years ago had SEER ratings of 10 or 11. As of Jan. 23, 2006, new residential central air conditioner standards went into effect. This means all air conditioners manufactured after that date had to achieve a SEER rating of 13 or higher. Businesses that still had systems in stock with lower ratings could still sell them, but none were manufactured at the lower rate after that date.

The "life span" of a central air conditioner is about 15-20 years. So if you have a newer model, the parts and services for your existing system are still available. However, whether you are a first-time buyer or want to upgrade your system, there are a few things to look for:

- A thermal expansion valve and a high-temperature rating (EER) greater than 11.6, for high-efficiency operation when the weather is at its hottest;
- A variable speed air handler for new ventilation systems;
- A unit that operates quietly;
- A fan only switch on your thermostat can help cool your home at night without running your air conditioner;
- A filter check light to remind you to check the filter after a predetermined number of operating hours; and
- An automatic delay fan switch to turn off the fan a few minutes after the compressor turns off.

When your new system is installed, make sure it is done properly so it works at peak efficiency. If you are replacing an older or failed split system, be sure that the evaporator coil is replaced with a new one that exactly matches the condenser coil in the new condensing unit. The air conditioner's efficiency will likely not improve if the existing evaporator coil is left in place; in fact, the old coil could cause the new compressor to fail prematurely.

Make sure the condensing unit is located in a shady spot, if possible, which can reduce your air conditioning costs. Also, check to see if any objects, such as bushes, are too close to the condensing unit. You want to have good air flow around the unit.

Have your air ducts checked to make sure they are sealed with duct mastic. This will also help save energy in the winter when you are using your central heating system.

If you still have questions about air conditioners, call the Idaho Energy Hotline, 1-800-334-SAVE, and ask to speak to an energy specialist.